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Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: a model of interfaith dialogue, Ian S. Markham, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, viii + 179 pp., no price, 978-0-7546-6931-9.

This book, by the President of Virginia Theological Seminary, is an attempt to outline a possible way forward for inter-religious dialogue, based on an engagement with the thought of a Turkish Muslim thinker, Said Nursi, the founder of the Nurcu (literally 'Light') movement, whose life straddled the crucially important period in the development of modern Turkey when the old multi-religious and multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire metamorphosed into the more uniform modern Turkish Republic, in the aftermath of the First World War.

Said Nursi died in 1960, so the author's engagement with his thought is not direct, but has rather been mediated through a number of Muslim colleagues, of whom Dr Faris Kaya, to whom the book is dedicated, is given special mention in the acknowledgements. A number of colleagues at the author's previous institution, Hartford Seminary, and several Turkish students are also given individual acknowledgement.

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The book consists of two parts, of not quite equal length. Part I, 'Learning from Said Nursi', after an introductory chapter on 'Christian Theology and Islam', investigates a number of the significant themes of his work, usually in dialogue with a significant Western thinker. Thus Chapter 2, 'Religious Basis for Ethics', engages with 'The Enlightenment project' of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Kierkegaard, Locke and Mill. Chapter 3, 'Challenging atheism', focuses on Bertrand Russell in particular. Chapter 4, 'Living life accountable', has brief references to Augustine, Milton, E.B. Pusey, and John Hick. The focus of Chapter 5, 'Faith First, Politics Second', is Richard John Neuhaus. John Hick returns as the main focus of Chapter 6, 'Engaging Religious Diversity'. Chapter 7, 'Coping with Globalisation', looks at the views of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Chapter 8, 'Grounded Spirituality', looks at the views of Larry and Lauri Fahlberg, two advocates of engagement with spirituality in the realm of healthcare. On all of these themes, the author's argument is that the views of Said Nursi are helpful and significant, which, on the basis of the range of his thinking alone, does indeed suggest that his views deserve to be far better-known. As the author himself acknowledges on page 4, 'studying the thought of ... Bediuzzaman ... Said Nursi ... has been a life-changing process'. Chapter 9 then outlines 'What Christians can learn from Bediuzzaman Said Nursi', with four lessons in particular being drawn

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out: 'Remain rooted', 'Change in ways that are true to the tradition', 'Witness to the Truth of Your Tradition in Non-Violent Ways', and 'Continue to Connect with Life'. Overall, the impression is given that, though the author does not use this phrase himself, the Nurus can perhaps be seen in a sense as 'the Anglicans of Islam', trying to navigate their way between different extremes of thought and practice, while engaging constructively with the representatives of different outlooks. As the author comments on p. 100, 'my settled disposition (as a rooted Christian) makes the encounter with ... Said Nursi so interesting ... I admire his rootedness. Yet I also admire his willingness to engage constructively with ... many debates ...'

Part II, 'Rethinking Dialogue', based partly on the author's Teape Lectures, delivered in Delhi and Calcutta in 2004, is a wider treatment of inter-religious dialogue in general. The three chapters based on the Teape Lectures discuss firstly 'The Dialogue Industry', as represented by Leonard Swidler (Chapter 10); then 'Learning from India' (Chapter 11), which investigates a number of significant thinkers in the Indian context, including Ashutosh Varshney, Bede Griffiths, Raimundo Panikkar and K.P. Aleaz; and then proposes 'A New Decalogue' (Chapter 12), as an alternative to the proposals of Leonard Swidler. Returning to the wider discussion of dialogue,

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Chapter 13 then focuses on why it is important to persuade conservatives (of any tradition, but particularly Christians) to get involved in dialogue, which is certainly a challenge in the era of Pastor Terry Jones and his ilk; and then Chapter 14 outlines 'Neither conservative nor liberal: a Theology of Christian Engagement with Non-Christian Traditions'. This is perhaps an unfortunate, rather negative ('non- ...') term to end on, but there is some helpful discussion of, on the one hand, Augustine, and, on the other, Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg lecture in September 2006, which brings the theme of the book back to Islam. The brief one-page conclusion then brings the reader back to Said Nursi as 'the future of interfaith dialogue' (p. 175), a model of how to avoid epistemological relativism in favour of 'tradition-constituted' reasons for dialogue.

Overall, Part I of the book, with its more specific focus on Said Nursi, works better for me than Part II, which reflects its different origins in both the Teape Lectures and then some wider reflections. But it is good to have serious engagement with both Middle Eastern and South Asian reflections on inter-religious dialogue, from different religious traditions, within the covers of a single book, and on the basis of the many figures discussed, particularly Said Nursi, the author leaves the reader with much to think on.

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